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THE EVILS WHICH MAY ARISE
TO THE
CONSTITUTION OF GREAT BRITAIN
FROM THE INFLUENCE OF
A TOO POWERFUL NOBILITY,
CONSIDERED
IN A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

On FRIDAY, MAY 29, 1789:

Being the Anniversary of the

RESTORATION OF KING CHARLES II.

MA 1760
BY W. PURKIS, D. D. F. S. A. K

Late Fellow of Magdalen College, and one of his Majesty's Preachers at
Whitehall; now Rector of Carlby and Anderby in Lincolnshire.

L O N D O N:

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DOCTOR GLYNN,
FELLOW OF KING'S COLLEGE.

DEAR SIR,

YOU will allow the Liberty I take in addressing this Discourse to you; for to a Person who is anxious only to declare what he thinks the Truth without giving Offence, it is no small Advantage to recollect that what he said obtained Your good Opinion.

To those who are acquainted with real Learning and the Scholars of the present Age, it is sufficient to mention your Name. But they who have not that advantage ought to be informed
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there is a Gentleman who lives in the University of Cambridge, who has through a long Life pursued and patronised every branch of useful Knowledge that contributes either to the growth of Truth, the support of Christianity, or the advancement of classic Elegance: at the same Time he has dignified his own Profession by a strict Examination into its Principles, and by a uniform Benevolence in the Practice of it.

That you may long continue the Ornament of your own Society, and of the University, to animate others to the discharge of Christian Duty, and to unprejudiced Inquiry, is the ardent Wish of,

DEAR SIR,

Your most affectionate, and most

Sincere humble Servant,

Carlby, near Stamford,
January 14, 1790.

W. PURKIS.

A
S E R M O N,
PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,
ON FRIDAY, MAY 29, 1789.

[Price ONE SHILLING.]

ST. R. M. O. N.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

(Price 0.25 SHILLINGS)

R O M A N S, XIII. 4.

—HE IS THE MINISTER OF GOD TO THEE FOR GOOD.

WE ought not to be much surpris'd if, at the first publishing the Gospel, many Believers, whose views were turned to the most important objects, should forget such distinctions of conduct in this world, as while in the Body we must attend to. Some, respecting the Jewish ordinances, might confound the Polity of that people with its Religious dispensations, and aim to render us a Christian Theocracy. Some, by despising the Pagan Ceremonies, which were but a matter of State, might neglect submission to the Magistrates in their municipal laws. Others, mistaking the spirit of Christ's doctrines, might apply the truths of the Gospel in a sense beyond their design, and consider them as rules by which they were to regulate every mode of civil government. Upon these accounts it was proper that the inspired Teachers of our faith should occasionally check such ill-judged zeal, and caution the disciples to avoid those mistakes in civil life, which good

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men are liable to run into, and which designing men would for private views always encourage. The subsequent history of the Church of Christ confirms these suggestions, and teaches us that the precepts we find in several parts of Scripture, respecting good order in Government, were altogether necessary. We observe, through different Ages, the greatest tyranny, the wildest schemes of anarchy, the private views of ambition, and the most profligate attempts to Rebellion, have all aimed to obtain their ends, under the sanction of Gospel authority, or Gospel liberty. This Kingdom in particular has suffered even more than other parts of Europe. The admirable Constitution we enjoy has been at one time trampled under foot by Superstition and Despotism—at another convulsed, and overwhelmed by the dark designs of Fanaticism and Usurpation—again, it had nearly become a Province to its most powerful enemies, by an unprincipled Cabal—and, last of all, was at the brink of Ruin, by the fallacious plea of Tenderness for others Consciences, and Humanity in dispensing with penal Statutes. Each convulsion has formed an Epoch in our Constitution; and the evils arising from them have hitherto, by a peculiar happy Providence, been prevented working our Ruin. Remedial checks have been found to restrain, for the future, Excess of power in either King or People.

Independent of all refined speculation about the Origin of civil government, whether it arose from parental authority,

thority, from conquest, or from compact, it is a certain truth that the end, for which it is established, is the Protection of the Subject; and that we all may apply the words of the Text to ourselves, and say that "the Magistrate is the Minister of God to us for our good."—With respect to the various forms of government that are admitted, each no doubt has its specific advantages, and its own peculiar evils. They ought, when examined, to be brought to the same test, namely, the Good of the Subject. All authority ought to aim ultimately at This,—either by defending the State at large,—by preserving it from sudden interruptions,—or from internal dissensions and convulsions. Whatever authority does not in some of these views eventually lead to the Good of the Subject, should be rejected as an unnecessary restraint upon natural Liberty. The peculiar excellence of the English Government is the regard paid to the safety and quiet of the meanest Subject in his person and property, and the security each man has that he may act in any manner he pleases, if consistent with the Laws. From that mixture of Government, which constitutes the admired Superiority in these kingdoms, we are liable to feel, for a time, the ill consequences which arise from each distinct form, and which adhere, without a chance of remedy to the Subject, where any One is separately established. We may be overwhelmed by the violence of a party, irritated by designing men, with the names of Religion and Liberty: we may for a time tremble under the cruel mandate of a tyrannical Sovereign; or we may find

ourselves oppressed by the insolence of an overgrown Aristocracy.

The Danger to our Constitution may arise therefore,

First, From the Usurpation of the Commons, in aiming to direct the executive Power, instead of censuring it.

Secondly, From the Tyranny of the King.

Thirdly, From the Influence of a too-powerful Nobility over both King and People.

The first of these evils was severely felt during the Usurpation; and the return of the royal family to the Throne put an end to the many various Outrages of military command, which a lust of power in weak minds almost necessarily produces. We read with reluctance that the honest endeavours of men who resisted Charles's excesses of power, were urged by precipitate votes to annihilate the influence of the Throne, and to become the Instruments of craft and design to overturn the whole of the Constitution. They were afterwards themselves involved in the same calamity with the very men they at first opposed. Whether indeed the evils that followed were the first plan of the crafty Fanatics, will admit of a doubt: it seems rather that, as their cause or influence increased, their fondness for power grew up; and they caught at every improvement of their fortune to obtain

tain higher objects. We read with still greater Concern how the name of Religion was the plea to kindle rebellion, to foment sedition, and to sanctify injustice; and Gospel liberty was the found to violence, to oppression, and to murder. For many years a military Usurpation created and alternately destroyed different modes of legislative authority, divided amongst its several leaders the property of most corporate societies, and taxed the subject to an amount which almost exceeds belief; while Religious worship and instruction were the cloak to hypocrisy, or the trumpet to sedition.

The minds of men are fully satisfied as to the Justice of the first resistance, as well as to the Source of the calamities which followed. We all lament that a want of Moderation on the one side, and of good Faith on the other, when the dispute began, widened the breach, and gave opportunity to the unprincipled adherents of Faction to work their own designs. Yet this day's event allows us room to bewail the precipitancy with which the Restoration of the Family was effected; although perhaps it might be absolutely necessary. By rushing from one extreme to the other, the opposite Tyranny grew up, namely, that of the Crown. Worn out with Fanaticism and Duplicity, all ranks of men pressed eagerly on (in a manner which marks our national character) without calling for any checks to that very Power which first occasioned the evils. Honest and undefigning in themselves, the people of this Kingdom
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generally think every body the same; and they presumed a King, received in a manner as was Charles, could never have been ungrateful, aim to destroy those rights he was called upon to defend, or pension out his Kingdom to its natural Enemies. The excellent and honest Historian of the times early saw the danger which this unlimited confidence might produce, and he lamented afterwards the want of parliamentary restraint over the power of the Throne. It was, we know, one of the private Causes of his Disgrace, that he would not support the measures then pursued by the Court to erect an Absolute Monarchy. Even in his opposing a Toleration of Religion, we shall find he was only afraid of granting that dispensing power to the Crown which his weak Son-in-law afterwards assumed. Instead of a spirit of persecution against the protestants, if we read his History with care, we shall perceive a jealous caution for the power of Parliament, and a conscientious regard for the welfare of Religion; lest, by an indiscriminate Liberty of Worship, the Popish doctrines should again grow up, supported (as he knew they would be) by the secret and unremitting influence of the Crown. The violent counsels of Charles, during the remainder of his reign, all prove it was not a principle of Toleration, which induced him to relax the laws in favour of Protestant Dissenters, but some hidden design to gratify either his Brother's bigotry, or in obedience to the orders he received from France.—The short reign of James is a summary of weakness and of craft, of violence and of cowardice.

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The Nation would have lost its character of good sense, honesty, and valour, if it had any longer submitted to such palpable imposition, as the dispensing power allowed by some Judges, or the mandates so nobly withstood by the seven Bishops.—The Revolution is an Epoch in which the people resumed their Authority in full, in order to define the limits of the executive power, and to prevent those Excesses which a Prince, guided by ambition, or baser motives, might hereafter commit. While a King could continue the same Parliament, and call it together only when he pleased, the good effects of being represented were lost to the Subject: the redress of Grievances was postponed by the Prorogation; and the virtuous few were liable to fines and imprisonments during an arbitrary Recess. This great Event was carried on with coolness and with vigour, and the glorious Effects of it are evident in every part of our subsequent History. We see ourselves during this century to have risen from a small Nation to a mighty Empire—to have grown in Greatness, while we increased in Civil Comforts—to have extended our Rule, while we extended our Commerce—and to have advanced in Science and Religious Inquiry superior to every other Kingdom.

Every person who partakes of, or recollects, the blessings of the British Constitution, must be anxious that it should long continue in its natural strength and purity: it will therefore be no unprofitable Caution to observe how this fair
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Fabrick may be insensibly undermined, and probably fall to decay; particularly if there seems to be a *gradual Progress* towards the most unpleasing of all Governments, an Overgrown Aristocracy.

The Peerage, independent of its rewarding Merit, seems to have increased in the present century from various causes: such as a desire to overturn a factious adherence to the abdicated Family: a desire to gain a steady majority in the Upper House: a wish to silence or to satisfy noisy Ambition; now and then perhaps to show Resentment to opposite systems of Administration: and, during the present Reign, from the repeated struggles for power amongst the Ancient Nobility. On the other hand, the efficacy of Representation is lessened, and in many parts entirely lost. The Weight of property and patronage overbalances, even in many counties, their Independency. The change of Inhabitants or decay of Trade leaves one place in the hands of Individuals, while growing Towns have personal wealth, but no share in the choice of Representatives. Many Corporations are conducted by inferior Tradesmen, who are under private Influence. These and other evident causes all draw to the same point, and bid us beware of the third Evil mentioned above—lest a too powerful Nobility may insensibly grow up, and obtain an undue influence over both King and People.

It requires no great depth of Intellect to discern the
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evils which arise from Aristocracy. Every State subject to this debasing form of government, which either past History or the present Time exhibits, shews us clearly its internal necessary Evils, and its inefficacy to carry on the honest designs of an industrious people. To exemplify this, would be rather a species of Declamation than Argument. The facts would tire our Curiosity, and only serve to increase that conviction already fully established. Whether we take the Archons of Athens; the Decemvirs or Senate of Rome; the Council of State of Venice; the superior Order in Holland, separately; the Nobles of Poland, or those of Denmark; the lately extirpated Senate of Sweden; the Lords of Scotland, or the ancient Barons of our own Kingdom; they all present us with the same melancholy view—that of depressing the common Subject, and of perplexing the Executive Power, only to satisfy family quarrels, or private ambition. The history of Europe in particular, to about the time of our Henry the Seventh, or when the provinces of Burgundy and Britanny were annexed to the Crown of France, is little more than the squabbles of a number of petty Tyrants, in order to teize their Prince or oppress their Vassals. What was called Liberty, in those days, had nothing to do with the safety and protection of the Individual; for it was only a liberty to each Baron to fight his own quarrels, or to subjugate his Neighbours and Dependents. It is certain that no Country ever supported its public Character for any length of time, or grew up to

permanent Influence, under the conduct of an Aristocracy. These are general Truths which would require a Volume to draw forth, and which it is not necessary to enlarge upon here. But, to bring the Subject within our present view, I would confine your attention, as to the influence of an Excessive Aristocracy in these Kingdoms, by some short remarks, as it affects the Crown, the Representation, and of course the Liberties, of the People; or the improvement of Learning, and growth of true Religion.

And, first, of the *Crown*.

The general wish of the Nobles is, to induce the King to receive through them only any knowledge of the true state of the Nation. As hereditary Counsellors, it is their Duty, they plead, to represent to their Sovereign their Opinion in public matters. This Claim, which is constitutional, when not applied exclusively, may by an overgrown Aristocracy prevent the King from knowing what is the real interest of his People. He may either have things misrepresented or concealed; and thus fall into measures which in the end may rivet the fetters of his Subjects, and render him a State Prisoner, or a mere Phantom of Authority; while perhaps he was indulging the hopes of a Patriot King—that he was making his People happy, and acting agreeable to the principles of the Constitution. All bodies of men have a natural wish to support the Dignity
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of their own Order. Hence it will happen that the Peers, as they perceive their Influence increase, will act in concert to the Exclusion of the other Estates. Every avenue for information being occupied by themselves or their dependents, the Crown must necessarily fall into their direction. Their disputes with the people must be supported, their friends only protected; and family interest, not professional merit, will be the claim to Reward. Any attempt from the Throne to resist their measures, will be resented by the whole Body, in the several Counties, by the clamours which the influence of the respective Peers can at any time excite. Whoever shall direct his Sovereign to increase the Peerage upon every accidental emergency, is placing a Thorn each time in his Pillow; and, what is worse, occasions another to be equally necessary. The making one Peer is only for the turn of the Day, and serves the purpose but while particular measures prevail. This can never operate for a uniform system of good Government; as in time each new Peer will join the common interest of the Order. In this Country, the general good depends upon various contingencies. The envy or ambition of our Enemies; the weakness or contention of our Friends; the private views of our Neighbours; the political craft of a managing and powerful Nation; or our own internal Dissensions—these may all work to our Detriment. It is therefore to the highest degree dangerous to a Sovereign of this Country to be obliged to persuade a set of Nobles to follow his measures, who are fond of their own distinction,

tion, and possessed exclusively of the power of the Nation. Many of whom (as some late State Papers teach us to suspect) may be privately bought over by the Enemy; and others only aim at power to indulge their pride, their resentment, or their avarice.

My second Observation regards the *People*.

The evils of Aristocracy affect particularly the Representation of the Commons. If persons of property are by degrees removed into the Upper House, the Members in the other will be little else but the Nominees of the Peers, who are brought in to support their interest; and the Voice of Parliament will only be the Echo of the Nobility. Any Dissolution would be ineffectual, as the same Interest would return the same Supporters. A House of Commons would soon become a piece of idle mockery in the cause of Liberty, as was the name of Consul and Senate in the lower ages of the Roman Empire. Still more, the House itself would grow into contempt; for what man of worth, independence, or integrity, would go there to be out-voted or jeered at by a Majority who have received their Mandate from those who appointed them? If ever Oeconomy, or a fondness for Money, should become fashionable amongst the Great (and Fashion changes every day), the property of the present Peerage would go near to absorb the influence of the Kingdom, and we should have few Independent Representatives. But dissipation, and a love of play (the Employments generally
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of a dissolute, an unimproved, or feeble mind) have hitherto prevented us feeling the Weight; and the dangerous effects of Vice have as yet counterbalanced its natural tendency. Yet as extravagance and a love of play will soon spread amongst the lower ranks of our People, and of course a want of Principle grow up, a general sale of Interest to the best Bidder must arise, and the Nobility may dictate the terms of every Election. Thus will our fair Fabric of Liberty fall to decay; and that goodly Mansion, in which the Poorest person finds security and comfort—in which the Cottager smiles, and the Widow and the Orphan almost forget their Woes—will be exchanged for the gloomy Castles of feudal Tyranny, where our Wants are relieved at the door with an insult, and Charity is dispensed by the hand of pride or caprice. Thus will our exertions of Industry be checked or encouraged, as the vanity or vices of our Task-Masters change their object. The smaller property of private Individuals will be lost, like little streams in a mighty river, in the prevailing influence of each neighbouring Peer. Our Commerce will naturally suffer as the Restrictions increase; and that spirit of Emulation which is only found in a free Country, and which expands itself, upon the fair hopes of public Protection and Reward, for useful Inventions, will be sunk in the mean and partial aim of assisting a Neighbour, whom we fear or despise, to outshine his Rival in trifling Ornaments. Yet farther—the distinction of Birth, which the descendants of Nobility so much presume upon, will of itself operate to
render

render Commerce mean in the eyes of a People. The History of every State, under the sole direction of Nobles, bears us out in this assertion, and testifies by facts that poverty and pride will vaunt themselves against the affluence of commercial property. The Nobles of Venice will, we know, meanly lend their Name in private trade, to procure a sufficiency of Income, which their Rank in public blushes to acknowledge. The present Italian States in general come near to this observation; where the common People waste their lives in Idleness, for want of sufficient Encouragement to cultivate their Abilities; and the Princes more ignominiously tyrannize over their Subjects, to excel in all those Refinements which mark the Character of a depraved and fallen People. Here let me not be mistaken.

Detached from any influence on the Representation, which ought always to be the case, the Peerage in its deliberative state is wisely instituted. It acts as a check upon the tyranny of the Crown, or the wild schemes of the Commons, if the latter be heated by party, or pursue intemperately chimerical notions. The Peers canvass with moderation the Effects of new Laws, or withstand at times the violence of popular clamour, which, towards the Conclusion of a Session, the other House may not think proper to oppose. The judicial knowledge which the House of Peers can occasionally apply to, renders their opinions more correct; and, being detached from the People at large,

large, it is their Duty, and may be their high Glory, to consider in the most extended view, and determine upon, Laws the most effective to the welfare of the Subject, and the good of the Constitution.

I come now to my third Observation, which, in this place particularly, should always be uppermost in our thoughts—

The Improvement of Learning, and the Growth of true Religion.

The envied and valuable Independency which the Members of these Institutions enjoy, has been perhaps one of the greatest Sources from whence the Learning that dignifies our Kingdom has grown to the height of being now so much admired and cultivated in Europe. Yet should the Electors submit to nominate, in their respective Societies, as they are directed by their Patrons, a few years would shew us a total neglect of literary merit. An unlimited Aristocracy would be the death of true Learning. It would soon reduce our pursuits to the mean employment of praising all the measures of the Great, and drawing up funeral Speeches full of brilliant verbal Conceits, like the Declamations we read with so much disgust in the decay of the Roman Language; or like those of a great neighbouring Kingdom upon the death of a favourite Minister; in which we are fatigued and disappointed,

having nothing but Expression to attend to. It is indeed a matter to be well considered, whether any thing like a general Pursuit of Learning, or free Enquiry into the principles of Religion, can be found in a regular Aristocracy; whether the quarrels between the Great, which arise from trifling causes, do not always check or entangle the mind in its scientific Enquiries; whether the jealousies and suspicions inherent in this form of Government, do not inflame the passions or thwart the principles of men, or restrain the vigour of an ingenious and inquisitive Understanding*. A King might, as an Individual, be biased in favour of a particular form of Religion; a People at large may be heated by Enthusiasm, and mean well, and aim to remove what they think present Error. But an Aristocracy never used the name of Religion, in a State Dispute, except as an Engine to gain over a Party. And in this I am supported by the testimony of every History I yet have met with.

I beg leave to conclude with the two following short Observations.

* The contemptible Disputes which arise from a contemptible Object (I mean the Game Laws) have, we know, embittered the Comforts of Thousands; and, as far as they go, shew us the danger and distress arising from Aristocratic Power. The origin of these Claims (says the humane and judicious Commentator upon our Laws†) is to be found in that remnant of Tyranny, the Forest-Laws of our Norman Kings, grounded upon the unreasonable notion of permanent property in wild Creatures.

† See Blackstone's Comment. vol. iv. p. 409, edit. 1st.

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It is not to irritate the minds of Youth against their Superiors that I thus draw forth to view the Dangers to which our present happy Establishment seems by degrees approaching: but it is to animate those who may be called forth, either to direct the counsels of the Throne, to be the Representatives of the People, or as the Explainers of our Laws; to preserve that just Balance to each Estate which forms the superiority of the British Government, and causes us at this day to be envied, feared, and admired by every Nation. Neither is it my aim to create animosities in the minds of the Elders amongst us. But I would wish them to keep in view, in their pursuits after dignity and wealth in the Church, that Learning only can improve where Independence and Liberty of choice prevail; and that Religion can never animate the minds of a People, who are not allowed to pursue it, free from political Contest.

Our History has shewn us how, under the wild direction of popular fury, Fanaticism and Usurpation extinguished every ray of sober Sense, and pure Religion; and this day's Event, joyful in itself, paved the Way for Superstition and Tyranny. At the happy Period in which we now may all exult; when our pious Sovereign is restored to the ardent Prayers of his People; when our national Character shines again in its genuine Lustre; when our Credit increases Abroad, and comfort at Home appears in every good man's countenance—it will be our own Fault, and not our Mis-

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fortune, if we involve ourselves in violent or dangerous Counsels.

It is the immediate Duty of the Members of this place to pursue with vigour those Studies which lead to the support of religious Truth and civil Liberty ; and it is our peculiar happiness, that both the Wishes and the Conduct of our Sovereign concur with the great plan for which our Seminaries are instituted and endowed. What may more particularly concern us to apply to in this happy Period of national glory will be a proper object for Inquiry on the day when we may hope to commemorate our Sovereign's Reign: when every good Christian, and every Well-wisher to the British Constitution, will gratefully join in Prayers to the Almighty for a Continuance of our present invaluable Blessings.